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Symbolism at War: Charles Ricketts and the Politics of the Stage

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ABSTRACT: This essay considers the effect of World War I on Charles Ricketts' work for the stage as an avant-garde set and costume designer. It looks at his cosmopolitan designs in the context of European symbolism. The first part of the essay focuses on Ricketts' symbolist manifesto 'The Art of Stage Decoration' (1913). The essay then examines his designs for three Shakespearean plays that toured Le Havre in 1918 to entertain the troops. I argue that, in the aftermath of the war, Ricketts' symbolism became the lens through which he assessed the complex political landscape of the 1920s. I suggest that his stance against realism politicised his practice and explains his interest in Mussolini's fascism.

KEYWORDS: Charles Ricketts, Symbolism, Theatre, Cosmopolitanism, First World War, Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, Fascism, Benito Mussolini.

When war broke out, decadent artist Charles Ricketts (1866–1931) had acquired a strong reputation among playwrights, artists, critics and the general theatre-going public for his avant-garde costume and stage designs. He was a late comer to this art. His first foray into theatre was in 1904, when he designed the Black Jester suit for W. B. Yeats' unfinished project of that title (Ricketts, 1939: 110). From the beginning, Ricketts felt at ease designing for the stage. Playwright and aviator Cecil Lewis, a close friend, recalls seeing Ricketts designing more than forty costumes in one day (Ricketts, 1939: 369). Ricketts loved working for the theatre. He was passionate, committed, and hands-on. When dissatisfied with the work

of seamstresses or working on a tight deadline, he would often take on the work himself, sewing dresses by hand well into the night, and using paint to decorate or create patterns in the fabric. Costumes were for him the ‘natural neighbourly act of one art to another’ (Ricketts, cited in Darracott, 1980: 170). He painted costumes as if they were book covers, illustrations for poems, or canvases. As a multifaceted artist, he also saw the stage through the lens of a variety of art forms. He painted it as if it was a large-scale canvas, defining it as ‘a picture in motion’, and as ‘a bas-relief’ (Ricketts, 1913: 230). His designs for the stage combined all the arts he had mastered as a painter, sculptor and book artist.

The war intensified Ricketts’ passion for the stage.¹ He accepted a commission to design sets and costumes for touring productions of William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Two Gentleman of Verona* at military sites. This essay begins with Ricketts’ manifesto for symbolism, ‘The Art of Stage Decoration’ (1913), in which he laid out his opposition to the dominant realist theatre and called for designs based on fantasy and the imagination. The reality of war, which broke out in 1914, posed a challenge to the cosmopolitan ideals that were at the heart of Ricketts’ symbolist practice. I suggest that in his work for the troops Ricketts re-affirmed the aesthetics of symbolism. In the aftermath of the war, and fearing for the future of art, Ricketts reacted to the political remapping of Europe aesthetically. The essay argues that in his battle against realism, symbolism colour-blinded him in his assessment of European politics, as he wondered if fascism could restore to the world the primacy of art.

Staging Symbolism, in or around 1913

Perhaps it was Oscar Wilde who planted in Ricketts the seed of passion for stage decoration when, in 1892, he asked him to sketch out a plan for his play *Salome*. Ricketts would finally stage *Salome* fourteen years later, in 1906. The press, however, boycotted the performance,

and no illustrated paper published any photographs of the representation (Ricketts, 1939: 137). But it got raving accolades from the decadent crowd that packed Kings Hall Theatre. Poet Edith Cooper described it as:

Eastern luxury in moonlight. A picture painted by Titian or Delacroix... no, only by Ricketts himself. Never has the stage been so wonderfully used – the picture painted by a great painter, with all the masses, lights, sparkle, glow, atmosphere of a masterpiece to set the human passion it symbolises. (Field, 1933: 250)

In his seminal 1913 article on ‘The Art of the Stage’, Ricketts recounts the performance thus: ‘I [...] placed dim cypress-like curtains against a star-lit sky; the players were clothed in every shade of blue, deepening into dark violet and green, the general harmony of blue on blue being relieved by the red lances of the soldiers’ (1913: 244). Ricketts described the dresses to Wilde’s friend and literary executor Robert Ross in the following manner:

Salome, dressed in a mist rising by moonlight, with a train of blue and black moths. Herodias, in a peacock train of Dahlias and a horned tiara. Herod, is robed in silver and blue lined with flame decorated with griffons, sphinxes and angels. The scene is all blue on blue. (Ricketts, cited in Ross, 1952: 127)

Framed by the cypress-like curtains (the cypress a symbol of mourning and a tree associated with cemeteries), Ricketts worked with gradations of blue and red to expose the shocking violence of the play. He also stage-managed lighting, creating a chromatic atmosphere of dark tones that evoked morbid sexual desires. His aim was to provoke in the viewer ‘the human passions [the play] symbolised’, as Cooper put it. His costumes too created rare

sensorial experiences. For example, the blue and black moths on Salome's dress, both strange and exquisite, symbolised beauty and disgust, while the griffon (associated with gold) in Herod's dress suggested mythic power. Paraphrasing Arthur Symons' definition of symbolism, every detail in the performance 'lead' the audience 'through beautiful things to the eternal beauty'. Using colours to inspire unconscious reflections on the viewer, Ricketts 'brush[ed] aside the realism of life' so that the audience could 'come closer to humanity' (Symons, 1899: 8-9).

In choosing to use images and symbols to invoke sensations, Ricketts was following ideas pioneered by Maurice Maeterlinck, whose symbolist theatre had become a European phenomenon. The sentiment of symbolism and of symbolist theatre is best expressed by Gustave Kahn, who proclaimed in *L'Evenement* (1886): 'We are tired of the everyday, the near-at-hand and the contemporaneous: we wish to be able to place the development of the symbol in any period, even in dreams [...] The essential aim of our art is to objectify the subjective' (cited in Munro, 2006: 28). Symbolist drama discarded realism and exposed the subjective world. Its ambition was to create a state of dreams. In England the two designers experimenting with symbolism on the stage were Edward Gordon Craig and Charles Ricketts. Kenneth Clark (1979: 23) has noted that Craig seems today to have been more influential because he was more theoretical (and published more). Ricketts' designs were as experimental as Craig's (indeed they were often compared), but Ricketts worked in more productions. His desire was to transmit his art to a wider audience.

Ricketts' essay on 'The Art of Stage Decoration' came out just as his costumes and stage designs for Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Death of Tintagiles* were on show in London's theatres, first at the St James Theatre in December 1912, and later at the Savoy in 1913 (Figure 1). For this performance, he had worked with shapes, colours and forms to suggest repetitive life patterns and the impossibility of breaking free: her dress ties her up.

Reclaiming for the stage the status of high art, 'The Art of the Stage', was included in his influential *Pages on Art*, which also contained chapters on Japanese, Chinese and French art. As a cosmopolitan artist, his 'pages' suggested the universality of art, which united the particular and national, the modern and antique, and the universal and cosmopolitan. The starting point of 'The Art of Stage Decoration' was Richard Wagner, and more particularly German theatre. Ricketts' main point was that British theatre lagged behind Germany's avant-garde approach: 'No single theatre in England has been affected by Wagner's steady artistic sense of the "practical"; our theatres and stages are still built on the pattern of the candle-lit theatre of the eighteenth century' (1913: 232). Ricketts however disagreed with Wagner in one important detail: his realism. Wagner tends to 'over-explain', he complains, he strains 'his medium by literal imitation' (1913: 234). Though Wagner's 'practical views of the theatre were revolutionary', he 'lacked the painter's sense of visualising his work beautifully' (1913: 236). Indeed, one of Ricketts' main point is that the innovations required on the stage could only be done by an artist: 'What is needed in England to save us from our sloppy staging of the poetic drama? I have said that it is the right man – the artist' (1913: 248). As can be observed in Ricketts' sketches for Wagner's operas (c. 1906 but published during the war in the *Illustrated London News* in 1916), Ricketts designed haunting landscapes. What Max Beerbohm said about Ricketts' designs for the 1907 performance of *King Lear* applies also to his sketches for Wagner's operas: 'His scenery has a large and simple dignity of line and colour. It is a fit setting to tragic issues. It looms ominous in infinity' (cited in Delaney, 1990: 237). Clothes functioned in the same way. In his avant-garde decontextualization of Renaissance clothes to dress Amfortas (in *Parsifal*), Ricketts expressed the mythological powers of the Holy Grail (Figures 2 and 3). Paraphrasing Jean Moréas much-quoted definition of symbolism, Ricketts' costumes 'cloth[ed] the ideal in a perceptible form' (Moréas, 1886).

Ricketts worked mostly (though not exclusively) with lyric drama, which gave his designs the emotional sublimity he sought for the stage. He remarked that stage decoration grew out ‘of the imaginative appeal of the tone poems themselves’ (1913: 236). Against traditional theatre, the central element in Ricketts’ designs was the elimination of realism and the creation of an intuitive imaginary world decontextualised from the real. He particularly disliked what he called the ‘pseudo-realistic settings of our melodramas and Shakespeare revivals’ (1913: 238). At the time of publication of ‘The Art of Stage Decoration’, Ricketts saw only two possible directions for the stage. One was the vision of Adolphe Appia, whose book *Music and Stage Setting* (1899) was revolutionising stage design in Germany and elsewhere. Ricketts had been vastly influenced by Appia, whose practice he summarised ‘as a discarding of all attempt at fussy realism or literalness of detail’ (1913: 237). In particular, he praised the way in which Appia had worked with lighting to create abstraction. The second direction was the anti-realism of Leon Bakst’s colourful *Ballets Russes*. Ricketts writes:

M. Bakst’s enchanting stage decorations, for instance, are but the highly and very temperamental rehandling of conditions which are newer in result than in aim; in their non-realism alone can they be said to belong to the new art of stage decoration. (Ricketts, 1913: 239)

His ‘fantastic decoration’ was ‘as vast as fancy’ (Ricketts, 1913: 242). Ricketts recognised in Bakst his own practice, comparing Bakst’s productions to his early work, namely his 1906 staging of *Salome*. But he denied that he had influenced Bakst, instead noting ‘a common indebtedness to Moreau’ (Ricketts, 1939: 227).

In his concluding remarks on ‘The Art of Stage Design’, Ricketts sought to channel the spirit of the Renaissance in his symbolist practice arguing for a polymathic approach to the

stage: 'The idea has been forcing itself upon me that there are as many possible styles of theatre decoration as there are plays'. All known arts might contribute to the stage: 'from the architect to the jeweller; from the painter to the maker of artificial flowers [...] in fact, all the arts which Leonardo might have at his command were he yet alive' (Ricketts, 1913: 240). A non-realistic stage required the imagination of an artist versed in many arts, a modern Renaissance man. In these remarks Ricketts was in essence describing his own practice.

Symbolism for Soldiers

A year after the publication of *Pages of Art*, the First World War broke out. As a cosmopolitan artist, with strong intellectual links to Germany, the declaration of war shocked Ricketts. He became obsessed with and was traumatized by the war. His diary between 1914 and 1918 reveals a depressed state of mind. He records daily news updates about the war, as well as distressing news received in letters from friends serving in the army or living in places under attack. On 2 August 1914, when Britain declared war on Germany, he writes: 'The outlook for art and artists will be dreadful, Germany being the focus of all activity just now, and the place where foreigners can sell' (1939: 209). As the war went on, Ricketts became more and more dispirited by the horror of lost lives and the barbaric destruction of art in Europe. Throughout the war, Ricketts' main concern was the safekeeping of art, energetically demanding the defence of museums from air-raids, and tirelessly campaigning for the transfer of works of art to secure areas. It would be at his insistence, for example, that the Parthenon Marbles were removed and protected (Delaney, 1990: 281). He feared that the war meant the end of art. On 23 November 1914, he remarked apocalyptically: 'The era of production in Art has closed [...] I feel already old beyond belief, a survivor from the romantic epoch which welcomed all Art manifestations and discovered "that approximate eternity" which we can compass by familiarity with the past' (1939: 223). The uniqueness of

art was a wonder to him, but its fragility was a concern. As he observed in 1916: 'A fool with a hatchet can destroy a masterpiece, and a generation may live and strive and not produce one' (1939: 254).

At a time of war, 'Art' helped Ricketts crystalise his position regarding nationhood and nationalism. He did not believe in neutrality:

The brutish cynicism of the Neutrals maybe based on a knowledge denied to us, they may know that the war is lost or impossible to win; probably we shall never know, and the world will split into two factions, the Allies and the new Barbarians.

(Ricketts, 1939: 274).

But he loathed nationalism. It is perhaps ironic that he would voice his rejection of nationalism to Sergei Diaghilev, the impresario of the *Ballets Russes*, whose company and performances were the acme of cosmopolitanism and artistic experimentation. Ricketts invited Diaghilev to his London home in 1917 to meet the British theatre manager Thomas Beecham. After commenting that the last production had been staged by Picasso, Ricketts quarrelled with Diaghilev over German music, which Diaghilev wanted 'to persecute and suppress'. Ricketts 'could hear nothing of the kind' and said that 'Schumann and Wagner had been the friends of all [his] life', that 'he hated nationalism in Art' (1939: 283). Ricketts refused to countenance the banning of art on account of its nationality, warning Diaghilev of the danger that kind of thinking posed to the very presence of the *Ballets Russes* in England. Ricketts' fears were confirmed when, at the end of the evening, Beecham decided against a Russian season in London with the excuse that he 'wished to encourage national British art' (Ricketts, 1939: 283). Ricketts saw art foremost as a cosmopolitan, humanizing activity: the exact opposite of war.

As part of his war effort, he took up in 1917 Lena Ashwell's commission to work on the costumes and stage designs for *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. These plays would tour Le Havre and Paris in 1918 to boost troop morale. Ashwell, as a young actress, had appeared in Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, pioneered entertainment for the troops. She raised funds that were used to organise concerts and plays, so-called 'hut performances'.² In the wake of the 1916 Shakespeare Tercentenary, there was an attempt to reclaim Shakespeare as a cultural British icon.³ Ashwell was for this reason keen on Shakespeare, whose works had continued to be performed in Berlin during the war. She worked closely with the actress and theatre manager Penelope Wheeler, who started the first Repertory Company in France and performed plays for the YMCA (Ashwell, 1922: 175). It was Wheeler who convinced Ricketts. He agreed to work on the productions not in a partisan way, but rather as a defence of art. He wanted to show what art could bring to human life. As he worked on the commission, he dealt mostly with Wheeler and by correspondence. This correspondence, discovered by Margaret Mitchell (2013) at the McNay Art Museum, includes sketches of his designs and reveals the minutiae of the work, his attention to detail and, above all, his uncompromising aesthetic vision.

He did all his work for free and was often out of pocket. He also found ways of saving money by creating costumes that could double up for other characters and plays:

I was working hand over hand in designing dresses and curtain settings for 'Twelfth Night', "Two Gentlemen of Verona" and the "Merchant of Venice" for the Y.M.C.A. Hut performances in France. Out of 30 dresses I made over 50, by transporting cloaks, doublets, etc., and not only does the trick not show, but the persons keep character, and some of the combinations are splendid. (Ricketts, cited in Binnie, 1984: 85)

He worked on the costumes, painting and stencilling ‘patterns onto fabric’ well into the night. As a new Leonardo, he produced everything for the performance: from jewellery and hats to dresses and bows. Though this handiwork compensated for the shortage of certain fabrics, he had always painted materials by hand for other productions before the war and he would continue to do so after the war, for his dresses and stages were always painterly (e.g., as Edith Cooper pointed out, *Salome*’s stage could have been a ‘Titian or a Delacroix’). He used two seamstresses, a Miss Leverton and a Miss Pye who, Michell writes ‘may have been the principal patternmaker’ (2013: 19). This Miss Pye, however, was not a seamstress as Mitchell suggests, but must have been the sculptor and member of the Neo-Pagan group Ethel Pye – a friend of Ricketts and of the poet Thomas Sturge Moore. Pye was well known in modernist circles: she made, for example, costumes designed by Thomas Sturge Moore for the staging of his verse plays (Legge, 1980: 259-60). Pye would later work with Moore on other art projects, for example, in the embroidering of silk panels for a wardrobe commissioned by W. B. Yeats (Bridge, 1953: 191).

Ashwell writes that the greatest effort of all their productions at Le Havre was *The Merchant of Venice* (1922: 179). Ricketts’ instructions were included next to his designs. In the following letter for the stage directions of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*, he suggests ways of adapting the designs to the Le Havre’s stage (Figures 4 and 5). He writes that ‘all save Shylock’s house [...] can be ~~painted~~ treated like a Japanese Kakemomo and rolled up’. As to colours, he wanted ‘pink walls or foliage, or blue walls, with the architrave continued right or left’, and he added an arrow in the letter pointing to the top pink design. ‘Or else’, he added (referring to the blue sketch) ‘hang your ugly blue curtains on each side of the design this won’t look bad, by damping your blue stuff you could get it so fold again into folds. His designs were well-defined but they were flexible, and with slight modifications could easily be adapted for other scenes:

I don't know how I should as do backgrounds for Paris. Originally the garden arch, a gold statue in niche, were to have done for Olivia's house as well as Belmont.- Please let me know later what is decided about Paris. I don't want it to be starved[?]. I shall practically duplicate the existing strips and add one for the Palace in Illyria.⁴

This was a show for soldiers and officers would only be allowed in if there was room. Soldiers fully participated in the production and staging of the play. They also built the set. Under Wheeler's direction, Ricketts' designs were 'enlarged and copied for the painted back-cloths' by the men in an old granary in the centre of town (Ashwell, 1922: 178). The male roles were always taken by the soldiers. Ashwell writes that Wheeler's company 'had some professional actresses, but as she had only two professional actors, she relied on the talent at the Base for the representatives of the men's parts' (1922: 176). The soldiers were passionate and committed. For the men, Ashwell remarks, '[i]t was a point of honour [...] to pull off the performance, however great the difficulties might be' (1922: 177). Sometimes the participating soldiers would be called away on duty, and this meant altering the entertainment programme and getting hold of other men to play the parts. With regards to the male costumes, these were made by Ricketts, Leverton and Pye, and were sent with precise notes: 'I want swagger and romance of the carriage of capes [...] Regarding the other men, see that the waists are very tight, the skirts projecting and the sashes falling at a point in the front' (Ricketts, cited in Mitchell 2013: 20). Because the garments were hand painted, he added instructions for adjusting the clothes so that the stencilling remained visible and in place. His vision was clear: 'I want the people to look aristocratic and romantic and full of ardent life' (Ricketts, cited in Mitchell, 2013: 20).

Rickett's sketches show that his stage designs were in accord with his earlier work. He had noted in 'The Art of the Stage' his dislike for pseudo-imitations of the past in

Shakespeare performances. In a letter to war poet Laurence Binyon, he explained the aesthetics behind his costumes:

I am working with both hands on dresses, etc., for the *Twelfth Night*, *Merchant of Venice*, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The third play is made by transposition of other dresses, and yet the Illyrians and Elizabethans of *Twelfth Night* are invisible in the other two plays, where I introduce a Giorgione and early Titian element. Sir Andrew Aguecheek has a doublet embroidered with grapes, squirrels, and butterflies; the Prince jewelled gloves. Shylock is terrific, Portia has a dress covered with mermaids, Jessica wears the Oriental garb of the Jewesses in Bellini and Carpaccio. I have introduced the striped dress of the Mass of Bolsena and Titan's Paduan frescoes, some persons have arabesques on their tights and gold wings on their hats. (Ricketts, 1939: 302-3)

If soldiers were expecting a re-creation of a classic, Ricketts offered them a vision of the Renaissance in the 1890s, a return to a period before the war, to the playful excesses and chromaticism of a time that lived for art, and for its own sake. In those costumes, Ricketts evoked the ideals of the Renaissance. But the clothes were both like and unlike it. They echoed distinct cultures, but he decontextualised them by manipulating volumes, with kimono-like costumes, for example. In doing so, the clothes looked like moving forms. And their floral and geometric repetitive patterns, at times inspired by Renaissance motifs, lured the viewer to perform a leap to the world of fantasy and dreams. The arabesques on their tights, gold wings in the hats, or the green dress covered with mermaids all enhanced the spectator's magical experience.

His vision was in fact never compromised, quite the opposite: the designs show how he used colours to conjure moods, with characters looking like pictures in motion. At the back of the letter (figure 5) is Ricketts' sketch for Shylock's home. Pointing to the floor, Ricketts writes: 'If you can paint floor grass green or scrap an old floor cloth to that purpose, it would look as we had a green floor in "Tintagiles" with immense effect' (my transcription). *The Death of Tintagiles*, a play for marionettes on infanticide, expressed horror, fear, the inevitability of fate, and the powerlessness of individuals in repetitive life cycles. This powerlessness is evoked in the green grass floor Ricketts asked for in his designs. The floor immediately attracts the eye, submerging our unconscious in the drama. One can see the same green in the garlands hanging over the walls which help emphasise the inescapability of fate: the characters walk on it; it hangs over them. It is impossible not to think of green fields and the battlefields when looking at this sketch.

One can better appreciate Ricketts' symbolist use of green in a diorama produced by Ethel Pye in 1920, currently at the Imperial War Museum (Figure 6). Soldiers must have keenly felt the contrast between the glaring bright green of the stage and their khaki suits. This artwork was part of a work commissioned by the Women's Work Subcommittee of the Imperial War Museum, whose role was to create a record of women's participation during the war. Vanessa Williams has examined the uniforms worn by the audience in Pye's diorama.⁵ She writes that 'the figures in the audience depict troops from across the services, both army and navy, with some in convalescent clothes' (2017: 164). She has also been able to identify a Glengarry cap, a sailor, and some officers seated at the back. As Williams points out 'it is unlikely that a single audience was ever comprised of such a varied collection of troops, this model includes them in order to demonstrate the vast cross-section of audience members who attended performances during the years of Ashwell's programme' (2017:166). Williams

equally suggests the shocking contrast of greens. In my view, what these chromatic greens symbolise is the inevitability of fate during the war: hope, fate, and the battle for life.

Symbolism for a New World Order

After 1918, symbolism helped Ricketts connect the post-war present with the art of the past. This is particularly evident in his designs for Arnold Bennett's play *Judith*, which was based on the apocryphal Old Testament book of the same name. It was produced on 30 April 1919. Bennett's drama presented Judith as a war heroine. The citizens of Bethulia, Judea, are dying of thirst, because Holofernes, the Assyrian general, has besieged the city. Judith goes to the enemy's camp and wins the war singlehandedly by seducing Holofernes, whom she later beheads in his tent. The play touched a sensitive nerve in post-war England, when England was coming to terms with the fact that its naval blockade was enforcing the starvation of Germany and Austria-Hungary (the blockade remained in place until the Treaty of Versailles was signed in June 1919). Moreover, Bennett drew attention to the cloud of invisibility engulfing women mobilised by the war. The play highlights how Judith's heroism gets overshadowed by the governor of Bethulia, Ozia, who proclaims the victory as his own. When he proposes marriage, Judith refuses him and the nationalist patriarchy that Ozia represents. She marries instead an Assyrian, offering thus a cross-cultural vision for the new world.

Ricketts created a symbolist performance to stage Bennett's *Judith* as his own post-war *Salome*. In one of his stage designs, currently held at the Ashmolean Museum, we see how he used chromatic variations of blue and orange, to represent the deserted city and produce in the spectator ideas of water and dryness. Lillah McCarthy, who played the character of Judith, described it as 'one of the more beautiful ever designed – it showed the great bronze gates and towers of the besieged city, and when you looked upon it hunger could

be seen walking the streets' (McCarthy, cited in Darracott, 1980: 179). His costume for Judith caused a scandal and was censored by the Lord Chamberlain. To poet Laurence Binyon, Ricketts wrote: 'Lillah's bare torso, covered with bands and straps of jewels, emerging from the fish-tail skirt, the jewelled leg also bare, would have enchanted Gustave Moreau' (1939: 315). He added that 'she looked like a Kwannon' (the Buddhist goddess of mercy) 'or Astarte' (the ancient deity, goddess of war and sexual love) (1939: 315). Not only did his costumes draw from other cultures and periods, but they were also somewhat gender neutral. Holofernes' bare torso was also covered with a strap and he wore a sarong-styled skirt. Judith's blue fish-tail skirt made her look like a siren, her dress connecting her to water and Homeric ideas of seduction. Hanging from the waist of the skirt were veils decorated with geometric circumflex symbols that pointed towards her sex. She also wore an enormous yellow shawl, in which Ricketts had stencilled black geometric square patterns. The shawl looked like a giant archaeological map of ancient buildings in the desert. It appeared to suggest that she wore those homes on her shoulders.⁶

In letters, Ricketts sounds as if he was somewhat pleased that he was censored, but he was clearly upset. The situation mirrored the censoring of Wilde's *Salome* by the Lord Chamberlain in 1893 and reminded him of the press' attacks on his own production of *Salome* in 1906. Judith's costume had meant a return to the stage of aesthetic ideals, but instead it proved that artistic freedom was still impossible in England, that feminism had not advanced much, and women's sexuality continued to be regulated by old laws. Ten years later, in 1928, censorship will be one of Ricketts' rallying cries against the government and the British press. He would come out in defence of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and of Radclyffe Hall's censored lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1939: 404, 405). He would write to the Home Secretary decrying the new censorship and demanding the renewal of the freedom of literature. In a further letter to the *Observer*, he would argue

against the suppression in England of European dramas. He writes: ‘other nations [...] consider the theatre a place for grown-up persons having a respect for art and its freedom’ (1939: 396). Not incidentally, also in 1928, he would criticise the Vatican pronouncement against the publication of a National Edition of the works of decadent poet-turned-fascist dictator Gabriele D’Annunzio, commissioned by Benito Mussolini (Brera, 2015:2). Ricketts wrote to his close friend, the fascist senator Antonio Cippico, who oversaw the edition: ‘one wishes the Church would leave art alone’ (1939: 394).

In 1919, however, the situation regarding censorship in *Judith* accentuated Ricketts’ depression, triggered by concerns about major shifts in world politics. He writes to playwright Gordon Bottomley in 1919: ‘I suppose part of my subconscious self is still frightened, disappointed, and anxious over major events, the bad treatment of Italy for instance and the dangers ahead over Russia and America, not to mention the unrest here’ (1939: 315). Ricketts was referring to the Treaty of Versailles. As a result of the intervention of the American president Woodrow Wilson, Italy did not get the land it had been promised during the war, including the Dalmatia region in Croatia. One outcome of this was the invasion of the Croatian port of Fiume in 1919 by D’Annunzio, who established there a city-state. In their rise to power, fascist leaders would capitalise on the mistreatment of Italy by the allies to galvanise support.

Ricketts found more worrying the situation in Russia after 1918. Bolshevism, as Delaney argues, meant for Ricketts the destruction of tradition and values (1990: 346). When wrongly accused by Cecil Lewis (who would later join the Communist Party) of being a ‘sort of Bolshevik smearing all things Russian with a large black brush’ (Ricketts, 1939: 338), Ricketts replied that his quarrel with Russia was formal and aesthetic. He writes to Lewis: ‘My stricture on some common traits in Russian literature (I except Turgenev) is that, like *all*

realistic literature, it has been hostile to permanent things (the aristocratic idea)' (1939: 338).

In his view, he went on, the literatures of Northern and Eastern Europe reeked of realism:

All realistic literature tends to be polemical, and I put on large spectacles of disapproval when reading Northern literatures, Scandinavian, Russian, and the new German, which form part of the reaction against Classicism and Romanticism in which we now are. (Ricketts, 1939: 338)

These comments, in my view, are central to how Ricketts connected aesthetics and politics in the aftermath of the war and illuminate his attraction to fascist politics in the 1920s. As shown above, this battle against realism had been the *cri de coeur* of his symbolist practice as a stage designer. Symbolism freed the imaginary, it was the international language of cosmopolis, enabling art to communicate across nations. It was an art form that empowered sexual liberation, too. This was evident in a new set of stage and costume designs for *Salome* for a 1920 production in Tokyo produced by the Shōchiku Theatrical Company. Those designs are perhaps his finest, and it must have pained him that the clothes were lost in customs as they arrived into the US on their way to Japan. By 1920, Ricketts had left behind Wilde's plot for *Salome*. Ricketts' 1920 *Salome* was based on a dream he had, in which Salome expressed 'her guilty passion for Herod' (1939: 319). In his version, which re-writes *Salome* as an incestuous play, John the Baptist makes ardent love to Salome, who rejects him. Symbolism helped him present seamlessly his transgressive *Salome* to a twentieth-century Japanese audience. The drama was a game of gazes, gazes of desire. For Herodias, for instance, Ricketts created a superb kimono-style robe with a long train. Both her robe and dress were thickly patterned with rhombuses spotted with black dots. They looked like geometric eyes. Herodias' costume appeared to have eyes everywhere. For the stage, Ricketts

created a dark blue world built around classical architecture, adding the Japanese Imperial crest, the 16-petaled chrysanthemum, to mark Salome as Japanese. He also used a green floor, just like both in *The Death of Tintagiles* and in *The Merchant of Venice*, to suggest, once more, destiny.

But, while symbolism remained for Ricketts the international language of art and human passions, with which to navigate cultures and worlds, a new world order had emerged, and his battle against realism became his political position. Whilst he often noted that he disliked revolutions of all kinds, his disenchantment led him to take a keen interest in Benito Mussolini, in whom he saw a leader who could restore Classicism and Romanticism to the world. To W. B. Yeats he wrote in the autumn of 1922:

We are all suffering from Democracy, and I read every morning whatever news there is from Italy, *re* Mussolini and his incomparable Fascisti. Are they the counter-revolution? Are they the sign of a world returning to order, duty, sense of real values, a return to construction and to veneration for firm things? [...] If Art will be wanted at all in the immediate future, it must be the expression of the new forces one hopes for. I wonder if there will be a Fascist movement here? I think it possible, but only after a greater period of discomfort and trouble. (Ricketts, 1939: 343)

The letter's date indicates that Ricketts was referring to major events in Italy, most notably the 'March on Rome': Mussolini became Italy's Prime Minister on 29 October 1922, while 25,000 Blackshirt paramilitaries ('his incomparable Fascisti') entered Rome. His comments regarding democracy echo Mussolini's speech in Milan on 4 October 1922. Mussolini had said: 'Democracy has deprived people's lives of "style". Fascism brings back "style" in people's lives' (Mussolini, cited in Falasca-Zamponi, 2000: 26).

Ricketts' question regarding the possibility of a Fascist movement in England requires contextualisation. In fact, the first fascio in Britain had been founded a year earlier, in 1921, in Antonio Cippico's home in Holland Road, Cippico being one of the founders (Richet, 2012: 128; Bernabei, 2020: 202). Cippico and Ricketts were very close friends, and their friendship may explain how Ricketts became interested in fascist ideology, though, as I argue here, Ricketts' symbolist beliefs accounts for his attraction to Mussolini's fascism. Between 1911 and 1928, Cippico was Professor of Italian Literature at University College London. He was an influential literary critic, known for his translations of Nietzsche and for his book *The Romantic Age in Italian Literature* (1918). As early as 1910, Cippico had praised the idealism of Shannon's art in a monographic essay for the Italian magazine *Vita d'arte*.⁷ He often dined with Ricketts and his partner Charles Shannon in each other's home; they were in fact near neighbours. In one of those dinners, at Cippico's in 1915, Cippico told Ricketts he had seen D'Annunzio in Paris. D'Annunzio had witnessed the burning of Reims Cathedral, and gleefully informed Cippico 'of the terrific effect of the flames devouring the roof against a star-lit sky' (Ricketts, 1939: 228). According to Mario Praz, Cippico had at home a picture by Ricketts, *The Fall of Icarus* (Praz, 1958: 257). Their friendship grew even stronger after Cippico's rise to power under Mussolini's leadership. Mussolini appointed him as Senator in 1923. Between 1925 and 1928 Cippico represented Italy in the League of Nations. Ricketts dedicated his book *Beyond the Threshold* (1929) 'To the poet Antonio Cippico'. In 1929, Cippico took Ricketts and Rickett's lover and companion, Henning Nyberg, around Rome in his car. As Delaney writes, 'Nyberg was thrilled to be saluted in the Fascist manner, and Ricketts' observations on this visit only confirmed his good opinion of what Mussolini was achieving' (1990: 383). All these details regarding his friendship with Cippico, make it challenging to assess Rickett's very own response to the probability of a Fascist movement in England, particularly when he had been so opposed to the war: 'I think it possible but only

after a greater period of discomfort and trouble.’ He surely knew of the violence perpetrated by D’Annunzio’s fascist experiment in Fiume. Cippico had supported the action and was awarded in 1920 the Medal of Ronchi by D’Annunzio himself.⁸

It matters that Ricketts was writing about Mussolini and fascism to W B. Yeats, who was also a friend of Cippico. In the 1920s, Yeats too was seeing Mussolini’s fascism in a favourable light (in the 1930s he would even write poems for the Irish Blueshirts). However, when Italy invaded Abyssinia in 1935, he withdrew his support for Mussolini and, in the Spanish Civil War, he would side with the Republican Party (Arkins, 2010: 74). Would have Ricketts done the same had he lived beyond 1931? In the 1920s and ’30s, other writers and intellectuals, decadents and modernists, in England and abroad, toyed with fascist politics: Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis or Daniel Halévy, who supported *L’Action Française*, declaring himself a ‘man of the extreme right’, are some well-known cases (Feldman, 2013; Munton, 2006; Wilson 1969).

In a footnote to his edition of Ricketts’ diary, published in 1939, eight years after Ricketts’ death, Cecil Lewis insinuates that Mussolini’s world vision echoed the aesthetic ideals of the decadent ’90s:

Mussolini has said ‘Life follows Art,’ and before we condemn Ricketts’ point of view as old-fashioned, we may pause to enquire ourselves whether we like the disintegration of standards in other directions, of which much modern Art (barbaric, grotesque, hurried, commercial) is the symbol. (Ricketts, 1939: 275)

Considering the readership of Ricketts’ diary, one may assume that Lewis wanted readers to see in Mussolini’s phrase, ‘Life follows Art’, a rephrasing of Wilde’s in ‘The Decay of Lying’ (1891). Most likely, however, Mussolini was quoting D’Annunzio. As Simonetta

Falasca-Zamponi has shown, Mussolini often appropriated D'Annunzio's ideas in his speeches and writings (2000: 6). Lewis's suggestion however helps one understand how fascism appealed to decadent artists and intellectuals. Fascism was promoting itself as an aesthetic ideal. Mussolini staged himself as a decadent artist, often declaring he wanted 'to make a masterpiece' out of his life (Mussolini, cited in Falasca-Zamponi, 2000: 15). In a 1926 speech, he affirmed: 'In order to give wise laws to a people it is also necessary to be something of an artist' (Mussolini, cited in Falasca-Zamponi, 15).

Fascism had learned much from decadence. It had learned how to be spectacular; how to appeal to the senses; how to mythologise; and how to create and use symbols. Lewis was sugar-coating Rickett's politics, but his defence of Ricketts is vital to understand how intellectuals confronted the radicalisation of thought in the 1930s. Lewis, who belonged to the Communist party, defended Ricketts by bringing together fascist and leftist ideas in his critique of modern art: the emphasis on speed, commerce, the grotesque. Lewis was not alone in decrying some of these ideas. In 1935, Walter Benjamin had argued in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* that the commodification of art had led to the loss of its aura, which enabled the manipulation of art by fascism.

Ricketts had put his hopes on Mussolini because he believed Mussolini was a modernised version of the old aristocracy of taste, while evidently overlooking the militaristic and violent tendencies which Italian fascism propagated. For Ricketts, art was a byword for Italy; he admired that Mussolini used art as the voice of Italy, and that he was uncovering Italy's Roman past. One might also note that Mussolini was instrumental in procuring Italian art for Ricketts' ambitious *Exhibition of Italian Art 1200-1900* held at London's Royal Academy of Arts in 1930, which attracted 580,000 visitors (Delaney, 1990: 380, 385). Mussolini was one of the honorary presidents of the exhibition, as was the Labour Prime

Minister, Ramsay MacDonald.⁹ The exhibition was a masterful publicity stunt for Mussolini. Was Ricketts aware that Italian art was for Mussolini a byword for propaganda?

If before the war, symbolism had been for Ricketts an aesthetic position, the aftermath of the war re-signified his symbolism as a political standpoint. To put it crudely, politics for Ricketts became an aesthetic choice: between the symbolism of Fascism, and the realism of Bolshevism. During the charged political landscape of the 1920s and early '30s, art remained the main driving force of his vision for world politics. Before his death in 1931, he would design set and costumes for Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Betrothal* (1921), for George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* (1924), and for John Masefield's religious play *The Coming of Christ* (1928), staged spectacularly at Canterbury Cathedral. Ricketts outdid his symbolist credentials with his designs for *The Coming of Christ*. He fashioned Christ as another Salome: he 'dressed Christ entirely in white, and red and white jewels, the archangels in gold, the girl-angels and Holy Virgin in Gentian blue, the warriors in steel and blood' (Ricketts, 1939: 401). He proudly told Lewis he had 'made the Holy Child without the assistance of a Virgin' adding 'Winston calls it Ricketts' Immaculate Conception [...] The Deanery has rocked with my Dionysiac presence' (Ricketts, 1939: 398). In other words, his signature as a costume and stage designer did not change, what had changed was the meaning he attached to his practice.

ENDNOTES

¹ Between 1914 and 1918, Ricketts worked as a designer in at least 10 plays. For a full list of dates and productions see Fletcher, n.p.

² For more on 'hut performances', see Leask, 2012: 117-67.

³ See Heinrich, 2015 and Leask, 2015.

⁴ McNay Art Museum, Ricketts Correspondence. TL2002.225.5. Transcriptions are mine.

⁵ Williams 2017. I would like to thank Vanessa Williams for generously allowing me to use and study her photographs of this extraordinary artwork.

⁶ This designed appears reproduced in Calloway, 73.

⁷ Cippico A (1910) Pittori rappresentativi: Charles Shannon. *Vita d'Arte*, III:5, 96-7.

⁸ See Cella S (1891) Antonio Cippico. In: *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*. Volume 25.

Available at: https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-cippico_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/

⁹ *Exhibition of Italian Art 1200-1900*. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1930, p. v.

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